

# STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF SEMIOTICS IN HUMOR TIMES MAGAZINE AND COMIC PEANUTS: THE ACCIDENTAL CANDIDATE

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**Abstract:** Comic is one of the books that consists of sequence pictures and text on the same page making it different from other books. It has visual language and metaphor that creates narrative stories through the drawings that appear in it. Visual language and metaphor consist of three important references namely iconic, indexical, and symbolic reference. This study aims at findings of students' understanding of semiotics by interpreting visual language and metaphor. The method used in this study is known as Descriptive Content Analysis which is describing in detail a certain text including characteristics and aspects in the text. Thus, 20 students of English Literature Department, UNM, were asked to write an argumentative essay. The instruments of this study are comic Peanuts: the Accidental Candidate and Humor Times Magazine. The result of the study has shown that students interpreted the visual language and metaphor by interpreting color in the comic that represents the symbol of a particular party, country, and royalty. In addition, students' writing showed that color is not only being the symbolic reference but also being the indexical reference. Cultural background affected students' interpretation of visual language and metaphor.

**Keyword:** visual language, visual metaphor, semiotics

**Abstrak:** Komik adalah salah satu buku yang terdiri dari rangkaian gambar dan teks pada halaman yang sama, hal tersebut membuat berbeda dengan buku lainnya. Komik mempunyai bahasa visual dan metafora yang membentuk cerita narasi melalui gambar yang muncul di dalamnya. Bahasa visual dan metafora terdiri dari tiga *reference* yang utama, yaitu *iconic*, *indexical*, dan *symbolic reference*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mencari tahu pemahaman siswa tentang semiotik dengan menafsirkan bahasa visual dan metafora. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini dikenal dengan *Descriptive Content Analysis* yang mana menggambarkan secara terperinci suatu teks meliputi karakteristik dan aspek yang ada di dalamnya. Jadi, 20 mahasiswa dari jurusan sastra Inggris, UNM, diminta untuk menulis sebuah esai argumentasi. Instrumen dari penelitian ini adalah *Peanuts: the Accidental Candidate* dan *Humor Times Magazine*. Hasil dari studi ini menunjukkan bahwa siswa menafsirkan bahasa visual dan metafora dengan menafsirkan warna pada komik sebagai simbol dari suatu partai tertentu, negara, dan perasaan terhormat. Sebagai tambahan, tulisan siswa menunjukkan bahwa warna tidak hanya merupakan penanda *symbolic* tetapi juga sebagai penanda *indexical*. Latar budaya mempengaruhi penafsiran siswa terhadap bahasa visual dan metafora.

**Kata kunci:** bahasa visual, metafora visual, semiotika

## 1. INTRODUCTION

People intend to spread the information to one another. They change the meaning and influence of other people, thus, it can be considered as communication (Buck & VanLear, 2002). Communication is not only about sending the word or sentence meaning, but also sharing the symbol system. Therefore, sign and symbol are used as the communication tools, thus, it is considered as a part of the language. Similar to language, sign and symbol need to be interpreted to grasp the meaning. In order to study and understand more about sign and symbol, it is important to explore it through semiotics. One of the semiotic implementations is comic which inside the comic there are many signs and symbols creating the visual language and metaphor. Visual language has linguistics modality that unites with other modalities of expression, uses a schematic vocabulary stored in human memories, creates an identity for its speakers, and like language, it is different between cultures (Cohn, 2013). Therefore, visual language is considered as one of the communication tools.

Even though the product of semiotics, which is comic, is known broadly for many people, it is not followed by the research about semiotics, especially in the education field. It is important to do this research because semiotics gives a big role in this digital era because the technology provides many graphics, images, and visual programming (Cohn, 2016; Fitrianie & Rothkrantz, 2006). In the education field, semiotics is important to the teacher who develops the material for students. The visual thinking can motivate the students to think critically and teacher can provide the material with more interactive learning material through different media for a better experience of language learning (Tomlinson, 2003). Moreover, the research about sequential images in visual language is a new research in the context of cognitive sciences.

Some previous studies have revealed that picture can give information to people for instance Swales (2016) conducted a research about the configuring image and context which the writer analyzes the art history texts of paintings. The result showed that the text of the picture was the synoptic discussion of the picture itself, provided a simple explanation to ensure non-expert viewer understand about the picture and gave the persuasion. In addition, the result of Martikainen (2017) research showed that using a picture in class gives deeper understanding in the field of art history and in developing knowledge of art history. However, those studies are not focused on visual language. The study about visual language has been conducted by Cohn, Murthy, and Foulsham (2016). Their result findings showed that the good readers can easily interpret the symbols by generalizing new meaning from an abstract schema that stored in memory for graphics meanings above characters' head.

The findings above are sufficient to lead the researcher to conduct the research about writing skill and interpretation of visual language and metaphor as the considerations. Therefore, the sole objective of this paper is to find out whether the students' interpretation through writing can lead them to the understanding of semiotics in comic.

## 2. METHOD

This part explains the methodology of the research in specific. Moreover, this study was applied descriptive content analysis design in form of qualitative research.

### 2.1. Source of Data

The research was held at English Literature Department, UNM. It had been selected as the place of the research because of easy access and required data which were suitable to obtain in that place. There were two instruments of the research that the researcher used in order to conduct the research namely comics and interview. The researcher chooses two comics; they are comic *Peanuts: the Accidental Candidate* written by Charles M. Schulz and *Humor Times Magazine*. The comic *Peanuts* tells about the class leader election and shows how the candidates compete for each

other to get a vote from other students. The researcher took some images that represent the type of signs namely *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. Whereas, *Humor Times Magazine* shows the visual metaphor in political satire, cartoon, and humor columns.

## 2.2. Data Collection

The participants of this research were students of English Literature Department UNM in semester 6<sup>th</sup>. The researcher conducted the research by involving 20 students as the participants. The researcher asked the students to look at several images taken from a certain chapter of the comic, then they wrote an argumentative essay based on the expression and visual language of the characters, they could relate them to the issue in the daily life. Then, those students were being separated into four groups based on their words production in writing. The groups were labeled with group A, B, C, and D. Each group consisted of students who produced more than 150 and students who produced less than 150 words. Then, the researcher interviewed four students to find out their obstacles in doing this activity. The type of interview that was done by the researcher was the semi-structured interview.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by analyzing recording units. Recording units relate to what part of the text that is being analyzed. It involved four important units (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998; Krippendorff, 2006), namely Physical units, Propositional units, Thematic units, and a conclusion.

The data were analyzed based on their Physical units by counting words that the students could produce in writing. It categorized into two group, the first group was visual language, and the second group was the visual metaphor. Then, the researcher analyzed the propositional units by connecting the sentences, phrase, and words with the visual language in comic. Hence, the researcher saw how the students described the visual language to writing works. Propositional units consist of a syntactical unit focusing on frequent words, phrase and sentences in writing, and referential unit focusing on the lexical chain.

Next step was analyzing the Thematic units in students' writing by seeing the theme explaining about what text tells about and what the students intend to write. At last, the researcher analyzed the connection between students' interpretation of visual language and metaphor and the sense in their writing.

## 3. FINDINGS

The data were taken by asking 20 students in semester 6<sup>th</sup> of the English Literature Department to interpret the visual language and metaphor in comics through the argumentative essay. There were two tasks that were given to students; task one was a comic strip that represented the visual language and task two was a comic that represented visual metaphor.

### 3.1. Visual Language

There are four images were represented in task one: the visual language which was taken from comic *Peanuts: The Accidental Candidate*. The comic *Peanuts: The Accidental Candidate* starts with the title panel, the second image shows initial, the third image shows a peak, and the fourth image shows the release.



**Figure 1.** Image 1<sup>st</sup> of visual language

Students interpret the first image by looking at the colors, and the words **candidate** and **vote** to conclude that the comic tells about the voting in America. The words **slogan**, **promote**, **banner**, and **campaign** share a common meaning and refer to vote. Whereas, **campaign**, **election**, **choice** refer to the candidate to be voted. In addition, students determine the location of the story by looking at the color of the image, it can be described in phrase **national flag** and the sentence **red, blue, and white represent the USA**. The phrases **social politics** and **Democratic Party** can describe the social issue that happens in the real life.



**Figure 2.** Image 1<sup>st</sup> of visual language

Students interpret it as the **works program** and their **mission** to be a chosen candidate; those interpretations are described through sentences namely **She provokes the other supporters of Charlie Brown for not choosing him** and **There are two candidates propose their own name as the president**. On the other hand, two students interpret the characters facial expression through sentences **the woman looks emotional and screaming**, **Frieda is confident** and **Charlie Brown looks very calm as the candidate**. Moreover, Charlie Brown is interpreted to be similar with **monk** because both of them have a bald head.



**Figure 3.** Image 3<sup>rd</sup> of visual language

There are two new characters are introduced in this image, however, only one character who is clearly mentioned his name; he is Pigpen. Students recognize his name by looking at the motion of the other three characters which point at Pigpen. It indicates the indexical reference which the characters motion, hand, and head movement of the characters indicating directly to the meaning. On the other hand, some students described the characters by looking at her appearance using the words **lady**, **girl**, and phrases the **green girl**, **stranger girl**, **blue girl**, and **yellow boy**.



**Figure 4.** Image 4<sup>th</sup> of visual language

In this image, there is a metaphor **dirty politician** that the students interpret it with **cheaters**, **corruption**, and **shallow mind person**. These interpretations show that students aware of the political situation. On the other hand, dirty persons do not mean they have the bad characteristic. Students interpret Pigpen based on what he has done during the campaign which is not involved in debating between the candidates. Therefore, Pigpen is described as an **honest person** and **Pigpen resembled a good politician**. In addition, the involvement of Pigpen in school election and become the chosen candidate makes students to describe Pigpen's feeling with **Pigpen is lucky** and **Pigpen is confident**. Students also interpret the background of this image and relate it with the word **royalty** such as in the sentences **background is yellow and shine resembled royalty**, and **Yellow is identical to the sun which means illuminating**. Yellow is bright, kind, and fresh, thus, it can give and develop emotional effect such as active and positive.

In students' writing, the theme about a wise and good candidate, political party, campaign, and gender differences are dominantly chosen by students.

a. The wise and true candidate will be chosen by people

Extract 1:

*People will vote for right person that wise and always tell the truth.*

At the fourth picture Pigpen said that even he's dirty but he's **not a dirty politician** by showing his sign. **This means that people choose him because he's a guy who will bring the truth.** (ADL)

b. Party's attributes during the campaign

Extract 4:

*Color resemble the parties during the election.*

When democracy party is begun, a symbol is very meaningful like as the use of color. **Sometimes a color symbol from a political party**, for example blue is symbol from Democrat party and yellow is GOLKAR. (MT)

c. Gender differences in political party

*Extract 6:*

*Battle between a girl and a boy during the school election.*

There are gender differences where **woman support woman candidate and man support man candidate.** (RSW)

### 3.2. Visual Metaphor

The second task is interpreting the visual metaphor. The images were taken from the Humor Times Magazine; it is the magazine that shows visual metaphor in political satire, cartoon, and humor columns. There are four images in this comic that describe the situation these days. This visual metaphor does not have a clear structure of sequential images.



**Figure 5.** Image 1<sup>st</sup> of visual metaphor

Students interpreted the image 1<sup>st</sup> by writing sentences such as **NNS welcome the members, people need vocation, and they criticize social life.** It seems that students are not purely interpreting the first image only, but by looking at the whole images and connecting them to the phrase non-conformist society. A nonconformist is a person who does not follow the trends of the common person, they tend to do what they want to do and not what other people want them to do. The students interpret *non-conformist society* with words **privacy, private, modernization, globalization, and cheaters.** Based on those words, students are trying to tell about the privacy in this global era where people tend to choose to save their privacy in order to do what they want to do. However, some of them can be cheaters to get what they want.



**Figure 6.** Image 2<sup>nd</sup> of visual metaphor

In image 2<sup>nd</sup>, students use the word **machine** that refers to a *scanner* and word **precious** that refers to a *bounty*. The involvement of the machine is very crucial in human life, it is described through sentences **a machine that switched the human position is the bounty scanner**, and **the machine has changed the human domination at work**. Through this image, there are two types of students' writing; students tend to interpret the comic by looking at its narrative structure which is mean that first image has correlative with the second image. On the other hands, students interpret the comic by looking at semantics structure which is mean that each image in the comic are not correlated with other images, however, each image represent a certain metaphor.



**Figure 7.** Image 3<sup>rd</sup> of visual metaphor

The third image shows a head of human resource and an employee. They have a conversation about the free time for the employee. In interpreting this image, students read the balloon text carefully and try to interpret the metaphor. Students use some words that refer to the *employee* such as **member**, **workers**, and **male**. Therefore, this shows the paradigmatic axis which shares a common meaning. In addition, those words can be a reference for the word *employee*. Reference helps the learner and researcher to refer things to a particular thing, reference is also determined by the concept of our mind, thus, we can decide a discourse make sense or not.



**Figure 8.** Image 4<sup>th</sup> of visual metaphor

In the arc of sequential images, the last image should be the peak. However, this image shows *initial* which illustrate two turkeys holding the phone and talking about Thanksgiving. In interpreting the last image, students faced the difficulty because they were not familiar with the thanksgiving event, thus, they use words **chickens** and **birds** that refer to turkeys. In addition, most students do not interpret it by looking at the visual metaphor; they interpret it literally how the image is depicted. They wrote sentence **two chickens will be eaten on a special day**; **special day** refers to **celebrating Thanksgiving**, and **two chicken will be eaten** means that human will butcher them so they need to turn off the service location as in the sentence **human's need for turkey meat is increasing**. On the other hand, a student interpret this image by grasping a message from this visual metaphor namely **doesn't throw your**

**precious time.** The student relates it with the previous image which he tries to explain that it is hard to get free time in a company. When an employee can get a day off, he or she should spend that time wisely.

The last image illustrates a comparison between two things that are not alike, **turkeys** and **employee**, then replace the word with another word, **free time** to **thanksgiving**. Thus, that student can grasp the meaning consciously.

Task two: visual metaphor tells about the social life, thus, the theme such as the use of technology, a tight schedule for workers in a company, and justice in life are dominantly chosen by students.

a. The use of technology gives big impact to the social life

*Extract 8:*

*In globalization era, it is hard to keep our privacy*

Many people can do everything with their live using social media such as gadget and smartphone to share their activity. Thus, **the post about something that very private make people who see it become know their privacy.** (WDY)

b. A tight schedule of employees make them need more time to take a rest.

*Extract 12:*

*Male employees work hard to earn money.*

**All they need is vocation.** The characters are in this comic are mostly **male who wanted to be free from their daily life.** (FRS)

c. Justice in life

*Extract 14:*

*Some people is struggling to find a job*

Pictures tell that there are **many people who work to meet their needs and others work just as a spare time. There are people who easily leave the job when there are people who struggle to find a job.** (NS)

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In writing an argumentative essay, students tend to use words based on what they see in the images, for example, students use word blue girl to describe Frieda, a girl characters in comic Peanuts: The Accidental Candidate because she is wearing a blue dress. While, in comic Humor Times Magazine, students use words such as bird and chicken to describe turkeys. These words and phrases can be replaced each other because a vertical connection between the signs that follow the selection of 'this – or – this – or – this', thus, the connection is called paradigmatic axis (Chandler, 2007). Moreover, those words share a common meaning, and thus, they create a lexical chain. According to Cook (1976), the lexical chain does not always consist of words which have the same meaning, but it can be possible to choose words that associate with each other. In addition, the words that students use in their writing are



influenced by the context while they interpreted the images. Context is the knowledge of the world out of the language which people use to interpret the message; it can be the situation around us, the society, culture and physical world (Cook, 1976), for instance, the student describes the character Charlie Brown similar with a monk. The student who uses this word tried to explain the iconic reference by interpreting two things that can be analogous with another object (Chandler, 2007). In addition, in metaphor, using the iconic sign as a model is represented as a mental model that organize perceptual information and it allows the reader to build the visual object of their iconic representation (Niño & Germán, 2014).

Equally important, students' interpretation of visual language and metaphor is helped by colors, expression, and balloon text in the comics. The use of colors in the visual language task is one of the symbolic references, while expression is the indexical reference. Students interpret colors blue, red and white as the America national flag, it is because they have knowledge about that country. According to Chandler (2007), a symbol is not directly and clearly have the same characteristic with the object that it is depicted, yet it has been named by people because they agreed upon and learned it. In addition, colors can give a contextual meaning which they convey product and brand meaning (Won & Westland, 2016). The use of color can also affect students feeling, for instance, the color yellow depicts a glory moment and gives royalty sensation when it is used as the background of Pigpen. According to Shimodaira and Hamada (2017), students in junior high school give the impression to the color yellow with bright, kind, and fresh. In addition, yellow is one of the warm colors which can give and develop emotional effect such as active and positive (Shimodaira & Hamada, 2017). Therefore, it may affect students to be more interested in doing task one rather than task two. However, the use of color in visual language does not usually give a certain interpretation or depict a particular thing. Some students used color to indicate the characters, for instance, the green girl, a yellow boy, and blue girl. On the other hand, some students connect the expression and the balloon text to get the interpretation. Chandler (2007) comments that indexical reference is not arbitrary give the meaning of the sign, but it gives a fixed meaning.

In writing visual language task, most of the students follow the instruction and they describe every image and connect them to a particular theme. As a result, many students choose the campaign, political party, and a good leader as the theme. According to Palmer (1981) reference helps the learner and researcher to refer things to a particular thing, reference is also determined by the concept of our mind, thus, we can decide a discourse make sense or not. While, in writing a visual metaphor task, students tend to look at the whole images and conclude all the interpretation into one or two paragraphs instead of describing each image. Students look the visual metaphor comic as the system-object which they need to structure the features of each image before they write (Johansen & Larsen, 2005). In addition, visual metaphor influences students feeling and emotion because it is possible for students to relate it to the reality, for instance, a male student can write much about the man as the main role in fulfilling family needs. Brandt (2014) states that metaphor can give the mental effect and affect someone's mental, and create the emotion concepts as Sauciuc (2014) states that metaphor has the important role in the structuring of emotion concept. In addition, according to Akesson and Oba (2017), students may write something like that because students make their assumption and particular frames based on the subjective lens and experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The important reference in interpreting visual language and metaphor is color. Students interpret the visual language and metaphor by interpreting color in the comic that represents the symbol of a particular party, country, and royalty. It is easy for some students to describe the characters who they do not know their name by writing the colors of each character. It shows that color is not only being the symbolic reference but also being the indexical reference. Students develop their argumentative essay by interpreting the sign and symbol in comics. They write their idea and opinion clearly, thus their interpretation is written in detail. Nevertheless, students difficult to interpret the visual metaphor because of their cultural background. Task two: Visual Metaphor tells about culture and situation in America,

thus, some students who are not familiar with the culture facing a hard time in interpreting the images.. Therefore, based on the findings obtained, it is suggested that students may interpret visual language and metaphor through speaking. In addition, teachers can introduce comic as the educational tool to students because an appropriate comic can trigger their creativity and critical thinking.

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